DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 193 FL 016 135

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TITLE Preparing LEP Students for On-the-Job Training.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 23p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT MinneTESOL Journal; v5 p7-28 Fall 1985

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; Communication Problems; *Communication Skills; Cultural Awareness; Employer Employee Relationship; *English (Second Language); Entry Workers; Immigrants; Language Skills; *Limited English Speaking; *On the Job Training; Organizational Communication; Second Language Instruction; *Vocational Adjustment

ABSTRACT

The problems faced by limited-English-proficient workers in the United States, particularly Indochinese immigrants with low-level English skills and little understanding of American culture are discussed. Classroom techniques and activities to familiarize LEP workers with the training process and to teach them workplace communication skills are presented. The discussion focuses on initial on-the-job training situations and two major communication problems: workers' failure to indicate to supervisory personnel that they do not understand instruction, and workers' reluctance to ask for help when they are having problems with their work. The exercises teach strategies and language for communicating to trainers a lack of understanding or a need for help, as well as for coping with redirection by a supervisor. They also provide practice as a means of gaining confidence, and emphasize the acceptability of making mistakes in English and asking for assistance. Figures and examples of dialogues are provided. (MSE)

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PREPARING LEP STUDENTS FOR ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

Catherine Robinson

For LEP workers and especially for many Indochinese who have fairly low English skills and little understanding of American culture, initial on-the-job training presents special challenges. This paper briefly discusses the kinds of problems LEP workers experience during training and outlines a set of language functions which can help workers communicate more clearly and easily on the job. Finally, a series of hands-on training exercises is described which can help LEP workers become familiar with the training process and give them the opportunity to use the communication strategies they are learning.

INTRODUCTION

In the past three years the ESL staff at the International Institute of Minnesota has been working to broaden its curriculum to include competencies which prepare students to function successfully on the job. Of special concern have been the needs of Indochinese students, many of whom face the prospect of beginning entry-level jobs with a minimum of English and almost no understanding of the American workplace. In order to assess student needs, a number of sources were used. Of particular help was a survey of employers done by Literacy 85, which identified the types of problems LEP workers have on the job (Literacy 85 1983). Other sources used were articles on the

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language demands which LEP workers face as they first learn their job and as they move through different stages of employment (Gage and Prince 1982, Jupp and Hodlin 1978). Also useful were needs assessments conducted by the International Institute for their own on-site VESL classes.

Analysis of the above material revealed that one of the most pressing problems LEP workers face is their inability to communicate clearly during training. Two behaviors commonly cause communication problems: 1) workers' failure to indicate to supervisory personnel that they do not understand instructions and 2) workers' reluctance to ask for help when they are having problems with their work. Although LEP workers are generally efficient once a particular task has been learned, they find it difficult to deal with even small changes in standard procedures or with other types of redirection. These lapses in communication not only cause frustration for trainers and workers alike, but also waste valuable production time.

COMPETENCIES FOR BETTER COMMUNICATION

In order to overcome the problems described above, students need to recognize situations where communication can break down and then learn language which can either help avoid the situation or overcome a communication problem when it arises. However, in working with LEP students, especially Hmong and Cambodians, we have realized that it is necessary not only to teach appropriate language, but also to give students an understanding of the American work culture and its expectations. In this paper, language competencies for improving communication during training are presented. The first set of competencies deals with what workers should do when they don't understand, the second with asking for help, and the third with coping with redirection. Following each description of competencies, training exercises for practice are presented. In these exercises, which were primarily

designed for beginning to intermediate level Indochinese[1], students are instructed in how to complete simple tasks and must use the competencies learned to communicate with their teacher in order to successfully complete the practice training session. As students participate in these exercises, they gain confidence and experience using new language, become familiar with many on-the-job procedures, and also have an opportunity to put newly learned behaviors to work.

Competencies for What to Do When You Don't Understand

When workers cannot understand or follow the training process, there are a number of strategies they can use. Asking the trainer to repeat something is especially useful, provided the trainer slows down his speech or paraphrases instructions using simpler words. However, once something has been repeated and workers still don't understand, they must become more specific in their inquiries, by indicating, as clearly as possible, the source of their misunderstanding.

Example:

Trainer: Write the name of your native country in the top right-hand corner.

Worker: [Can you please repeat that?
Please repeat that more slowly.

Trainer: (Trainer repeats.)

Worker: [I don't understand that.
I don't understand "native."

Responding clearly to a supervisor's inquiry about whether

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[1]This level is equivalent to the new Minnesota State Department Levels 3 and 4.

something has been understood is also extremely important for good communication. Our sources indicated that supervisors and lead workers find it especially frustrating when workers pretend that they understand. "He's always saying 'yes,' but I never know if he really understands" — this is a common lament of training personnel. Yet a simple response can let a trainer know that the worker does not yet understand what to do.

Example:

Trainer: Fold it like this. Do you understand?

Worker: No, I'm not sure. Can you show me again?

Although indicating lack of understanding is of primary importance while following instructions, letting one's trainer know that he is being understood also goes a long way toward improving communication. Saying "Okay" after each step is explained lets the trainer know that the process is being followed and that the trainer can continue with the explanation. (At the same time, of course, it is important to stress to students that workers should never indicate comprehension if they don't really understand.)

Example:

Trainer: Put it through here and then around here. (Trainer demonstrates.)

Worker: Okay.

Trainer: Then thread from left to right. Any questions?

Worker: No, I get it.

Seeking clarification helps workers make sure that they have understood. Workers should be encouraged to repeat important information and to ask short information questions.

Checking that a task has been done correctly also improves communication.

Example:

Trainer: You need one-half cup cleaner and one gallon of water.

Worker: One-half cup cleaner and how much water?

Trainer: One gallon.

Worker: Is this right? (Worker fills bucket.)

Trainer: Yes.

Training Exercises for Practicing What to Do When You Don't Understand

Before describing this exercise, it is important to remind teachers that training exercises are meant to be used as final communicative activities. New competencies are usually introduced in conversations and, once understood, are practiced individually before doing training exercises in which students are required to use a variety of competencies.

In this training exercise students will need to use the following competencies:

-Indicating understanding or lack of understanding

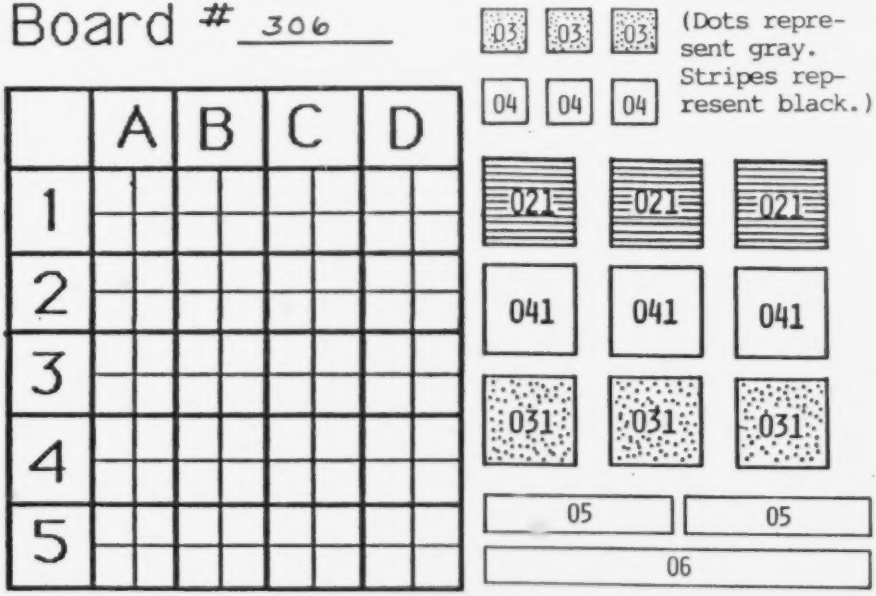
-Asking for information or for a repetition of the demonstration of a task

-Seeking clarification by repeating important information or by asking information questions

-Asking for work to be checked

Materials for this exercise are pictured in Figure 1.[2] They include a grid and colored squares which are referred to as an assembly board and parts, respectively.

Figure 1: Assembly Board and Parts



In this exercise, the teacher gives an instruction such as "Put a large black square at B4." The student's task is to assemble the board according to the teacher's instructions by placing the parts in the correct positions. If, at any time, the student cannot follow the teacher's instructions, he is to use the

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[2]These exercises and the materials for performing them appear in Speaking Up At Work (Robinson and Rowekamp 1985), a VESL text developed at the International Institute of Minnesota.

competencies he has learned to communicate with the teacher in order to successfully complete the task.

Since the goal of this exercise is to teach students to cope in situations where not everything is understood, vocabulary used in the instructions — such as place, connect, remove, center, upper right-hand corner — should not be explained before beginning the exercise. Although most students are accustomed to having vocabulary pretaught, they are quite accepting of this procedure if the teacher emphasizes that in their daily lives, and especially at work, they will often not understand all that they hear and that this practice will prepare for just that kind of situation. It is important that students learn that they can function in situations where there are unknowns, and that they realize that they can complete a task even though they don't initially understand everything.

This exercise can be done with the whole class, but students will get more opportunity to interact with their teachers if small groups are used. The following training segment gives examples of instructions and of the kinds of student responses teachers can expect. Figure 2 shows what the student has produced at the end of the training segment.

Training Segment:

Teacher	Place a large black square at D5.
Student #1:	At D5?
Teacher:	Right. Now put a small gray square in the center of A1.
Student #2:	Ann, I don't understand that.
Teacher:	Put a small gray square in the middle of A1.
Student #2:	Like this? (Places square in the center of

A1.)

Teacher: That's right. Now use your long connector and connect the gray and the black squares.

Student #3: Can you please repeat that?

Teacher: Use your long connector to connect the gray and black squares.

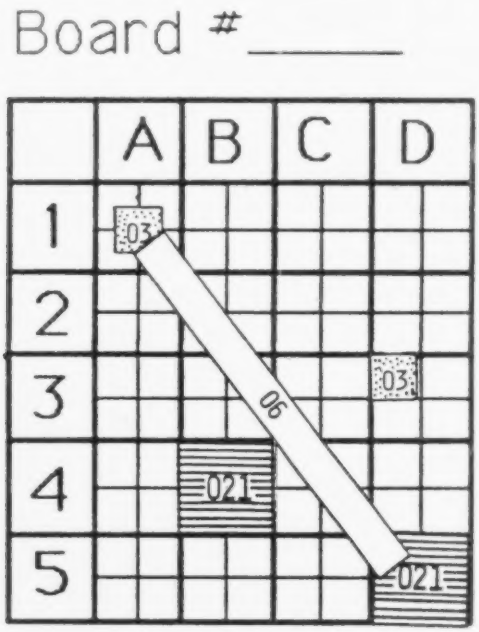
Student #3: I don't understand "connec ...."

Teacher: I want you to use this connector (shows worker connector) and connect the two squares like this. (Shows connecting.)

Student #3: I see.

We find that many of our students, especially the Hmong, either because of their limited English skills or perhaps because of their cultural background, are somewhat reticent about indicating lack of understanding. For these students, perhaps the most important lesson learned through these exercises is that it is their responsibility to indicate when something is not understood, and that teachers and future trainers will expect this behavior. Continuing to encourage students to use these competencies on an on-going basis in the classroom can also help them internalize newly learned behavior.

Figure 2: Partially Completed Assembly Board



Competencies for Asking for Help

Once the trainer has explained and/or shown the worker what to do, the worker can begin to work independently. At this stage, asking for help and being able to explain problems are necessary skills. To get help, workers need to get their trainer's attention and then ask for assistance by stating what their problem is or by asking a question.

Example:

Worker: Stan, can you help me a minute?

Trainer: Sure. What's up?

Worker: I don't know how to change this needle.
I can't fill out this form. What do I write here?
I'm not sure what to do now.
Do I cut here?

During the trainer's explanation, workers indicate their lack of understanding, ask for repetitions and seek clarification as described previously. They may also want to ask their trainer to watch them do a task to make sure they understand it.

Example:

Worker: I can't thread this machine.

Trainer: Let me show you. (Trainer demonstrates.) Do you understand?

Worker: I'm not sure. Can you show me again?

Trainer: Sure. (Trainer demonstrates again.)

Worker: Okay. Can you watch me do it?
(Trainer observes as worker completes the task.)

Training Exercise #1 for Practicing Asking for Help

To practice asking for help it is useful to use simple tasks of two or three steps. Activities such as running a tape recorder, loading a stapler, changing batteries, threading a sewing machine, or running a ditto machine work well. In this exercise, students will be practicing the following competencies:

-Getting the trainer's attention and asking for help
-Stating the problem
-Requesting redemonstration
-Asking the trainer to watch them complete a task

As mentioned previously, it is important to practice individual competencies before attempting the training exercise. In this exercise, stating the problem is the most difficult part and can be practiced by passing out the items which the students will eventually be using for the training exercise and then practicing sentences like these:

I can't thread this machine.
I don't know how to change these batteries.
I can't fill out this form.
I don't know how to use this tape recorder.

The training exercise consists of having students ask the teacher for help with one of the above activities. Students should then use as many of the new competencies as are needed to learn the activity the teacher is demonstrating.

Training segment:

Student: Excuse me, Ann. Can you help me a minute?

Teacher: Sure. What's the problem?

Student: I don't know how to thread this machine.

Teacher: Okay. First you put the thread here. Then it goes through here and then here. Next it goes under here and you have to pull up like this.

Student: Can you show me that last part again?

Teacher: It goes under here and then you pull up.

Student: Okay.

Teacher: Then through here and here. And now you thread the needle. You have to thread from left to right. Any

questions.?

Student: I think I get it. Can you watch me do it once?

Teacher: Sure. (Trainer observes completion of task.)

Training Exercise #2 for Practicing Asking for Help

Another activity that workers often need help with is filling out forms and dealing with paperwork. Competencies for this training exercise include:

-Indicating that they don't understand or can't read something

-Asking what to write or put in a particular place

-Asking how to spell a word

-Asking if they should sign a form

To help students practice these competencies before doing the exercise, we use the cue cards which appear in Figure 3. A student points to the item on the card and uses one of the competencies to elicit necessary information. For example, the student points to marital and says: "I don't understand this word."

Figure 3
Cue cards and responses

Cue card		Student response
Marital status	or or	I don't understand this What does this (word) mean? I can't read this.
?	or	What do I write here? What do I put here?
S-O-L-D-I-E-R		How do you spell soldier?
(signature)		Do I sign here?

Once students have mastered this language, they are ready to do the training exercise. In the exercise, students use the list of supplies shown in Figure 4 to fill out the accompanying supply request. As in the previous exercises, the teacher should give the students a minimum of explanation. For example, it is not necessary to preteach new vocabulary on the supply list or to explain abbreviations or particular numbers on the supply request form. Students are responsible for getting this information from their teacher and should be encouraged not to speak to other students during the exercise. The biggest

challenge for teachers during this exercise is to wait patiently for students to realize that they cannot complete the work without getting assistance. Students will be working at their own pace and will only ask about the items which they do not understand.

Figure 4: Supply list and supply request

SUPPLY LIST

2 needles, #260
1 spool thread, #032, green
1 zipper, #021, orange

SUPPLY REQUEST FORM

_____ Dept. _____

Amount	Item name	Part #	Color
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

__/__/__

_____
(signature)

_____
(signature)

Training Segment:

Teacher: Please use this supply list to complete the supply request. Please ask me if you have any questions. (Students begin working.)

Student #1 Ann, can you help me a minute?

Teacher: Sure.

Student #1: What do I write here? (Student points to the blank

after #.)

Teacher: You write your employee number.

Student #2: Ann, what do I put here? (Student points to the blank after "Dept.")

Teacher: Write your department.

Student #2: How do you spell "production"?

Teacher: P-R-O-D-U-C-T-I-O-N .

Student #2: Okay, thanks.

(Students continue working.)

Student #3: Ann, what's this number? (Student points to "#260.")

Teacher: That's the part number. You write it here.

Student #3: Like this? (Student writes in the number.)

Teacher: That's right.

Student #2: Do I sign here? (Student points to first signature line.)

Teacher: Yes. You sign there and the supply room clerk signs on the bottom line.

Student: Okay. Thanks.

As in the previous exercises, new language as well as new behaviors are being practiced here. Students must be encouraged to take the initiative when they need help. They need to realize that supervisory people are usually willing to help and that

ignoring problems and not asking for help can cause personal as well as production problems.

Competencies for Coping with Redirection

Redirection involves giving new instructions related to the current task a worker is doing, or giving instructions about other tasks which must be completed at a particular time. To cope with these kinds of situations, workers may need to use some of the strategies already discussed. Although it is virtually impossible to know what specific interruptions workers will encounter, it is useful for workers to be familiar with general vocabulary used for describing changes in procedures and with vocabulary for indicating the sequencing of tasks.

Common vocabulary for describing changes might include words such as substitute, change, and instead of. In the example below, notice how the worker indicates lack of understanding and seeks clarification.

Example:

Trainer: You'll have to change these. Use black squares instead of white.

Worker: Sorry, I don't understand.

Trainer: Take off the white squares and put black ones.

Worker: Black and no white, right?

Trainer: That's it.

In order to communicate clearly about the sequencing of tasks, workers must have a clear understanding of adverbs of time. During redirection, it is also important that the worker be able to state clearly when he will finish a current task and when a new task will be started.

Examples:

Trainer: Are you finished?

Worker: I'll be done in about 5 minutes.

Trainer: When you finish, I want you to bus tables 3 and 7.

Worker: Okay. (Worker finishes current task and then buses the tables.)

Trainer: Jim, before you do the tables, get me some glasses from the kitchen.

Worker: How many?

Trainer: Eight.

Worker: Okay. (Worker gets glasses and then buses the tables.)

Training Exercise for Practicing Redirection

Before beginning this training exercise, it is necessary to give students some practice understanding the sequencing of tasks. In this exercise, the teacher should have four to six simple tasks available for students to do. Props such as filecards, brooms, rags and cleaners should be available for students to use as they perform tasks such as putting cards in alphabetical order, putting cards in numerical order, sweeping the floor, erasing the blackboards, cleaning the windows.

The teacher should direct the students in the following manner:

Example:

Teacher: Phon, please put these cards in alphabetical order by last name.

Student: Okay.

Teacher: Sam, clean that window.

Student: Okay.

Teacher: Phon, when you finish that, clean this blackboard.

Student: Okay. (Phon completes cards and then does the blackboard.)

Teacher: Sam, before you finish that, get me the broom. (Sam stops working on the window and gets the broom for the teacher. He then goes back and completes the window.)

Once students have done the above practice, they can attempt the training exercise which includes the following competencies.

-Use strategies such as indicating lack of understanding, requesting repetition, and using clarification to make sure that redirection instructions have been understood

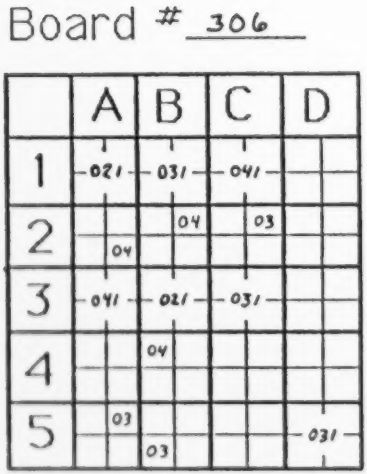
-Ask for help if written instructions are not understood

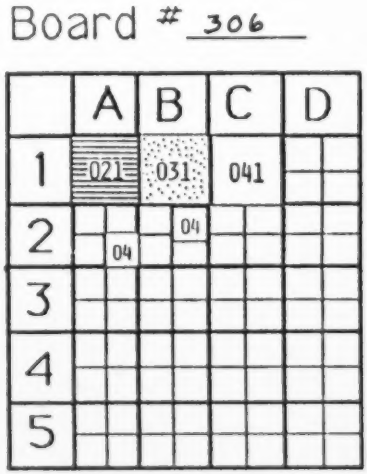
-Indicate when a current task will be completed and when a new task will be started

-Understand when current and new tasks should be completed

For this training exercise, students use the assembly board and parts seen in the first exercise (Figure 1). They will be working from the coded assembly plan in Figure 5, which designates the number of each part that must be placed on the board. As students work to complete their boards, the teacher will move among them and indicate changes that they should make on their boards and also direct them to do different tasks. The activities previously used to practice the sequencing of tasks can be used for redirection. Whenever necessary, students should use previously learned competencies to get help with their work.

Figure 5
Coded assembly plan and partially completed assembly board





Training Segment:

Student #1: Is this right? (Student places part 021 at A1.)

Teacher: Yes, that's right.
Keng, have you finished row 2?

Student #2: Not quite.

Teacher: When you finish it, I want you to put these cards in alphabetical order by last name.

Student #2: By last name?

Teacher: Right.

Student #2: Okay. (Student completes row 2 and then does the cards.)
I finished the cards.

Teacher: Thanks.
Shoua, you'll have to change C3. Substitute a black square instead.

Student #3: A black square?

Teacher: Right.
Ana, please change the order in row one. Put white-gray-black instead of black-gray-white.

Student #4: I don't understand that.

Teacher: You have to change these two. (Teacher demonstrates.)

Student #4: I see.

Besides offering students useful practice dealing with redirection, this exercise teaches the important lesson that being flexible on the job is essential. Students need to understand that it is unusual for workers to be able to sit and do one job all day. They need to realize that the workers who are successful are those that can cope with changes and be redirected easily.

CONCLUSION

For our students, the most important function of these exercises is as a model of appropriate on-the-job behavior and as a vehicle for practicing this newly learned behavior. In our classes, we attempt to help students acquire the confidence that, although they may not know as much English as they would like, they can still cope in situations where communication is difficult. We also try to help students understand that to avoid speaking English by pretending that something has been understood, or by not asking for needed help is self-defeating because it can alienate supervisors and coworkers and because the opportunity to use and to improve one's English is lost. It is often not easy for many of our Indochinese students to take the initiative and use these new competencies when it is appropriate. For these students, training exercises, combined with constant reinforcement of competencies during other classroom activities, can be a first step in equipping students with the communication skills and the sense of responsibility they will need during on-the-job training.

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